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ABSTRACT

Two modules comprise this document--one on the Aba women's rebellion in Nigeria and one on the Egyptian feminist movement. The paper on the Aba women's rebellion in Nigeria presents a background discussion of the women's movement and colonialism in Nigeria. The larger part of the paper is a lesson plan which investigates the women's rebellion through a question-answer exercise. Questions asked include (1) why did the women revolt? (2) what factors facilitated the Aba rebellion? (3) why did the women attack their own chiefs as well as the British? and (4) is the right to resist unqualified? Two enrichment activities dealing with international civil rights are suggested. Intended for use in teaching students about nationalism in Egypt, the Egyptian feminist paper focuses on a woman named Hoda Sha'arawi who carried her convictions from the nationalist to the feminist struggle in 1919. The objective of the paper is to enable students to describe the characteristics of colonialism and nationalism and their links to feminism. An historical sketch of the activities of Hoda Sha'arawi is presented and questions and activities are suggested. (Author/DB)

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ABA WOMEN'S REBELLION

When the character of the rebellions themselves is reviewed, the overwhelming impression is of the vigour and solidarity of the women. Men occasionally made a flickering appearance in the background, but they seem, with a few exceptions, to have stood completely on one side, passive, if consenting parties, to the extraordinary behaviour of the wives. Such a movement is almost unthinkable among the more docile stay-at-home women of the greater part of eastern and southern Africa, but the West Coast women, (at least in those parts where neither strong measures of conquest nor Islam have tamed them,) seem to be made of sterner stuff. The traveller from East Africa must be struck at once on his arrival in Ibo country by the huge crowd of strenuous, excited women who fill the markets and stream along the roads in pursuit of trade, and whose manner is markedly free towards himself and their fellows. Their organization into societies and age groups -- their concentration in markets and wide dispersal along the trade routes, are factors which may help to account for their rapid mobilization over two Provinces.

The women surprised their rulers, surprised their own people, and probably, themselves. All the male witnesses, both Europeans who had been long in the country and Africans, insisted that they had never seen anything like this happen before. 'I am an old man', said one witness, 'and have been a chief for a long time... In all my life I never saw the women carring on in this fashion before. I never before saw the women flinging sand at their chiefs or white men or attaching them with sticks...' The Africans...were surprised to see so many strange women from distant parts collected together. The demonstrators themselves, who readily gave evidence, even volunteering to do so, explained how they sent round the palm-leaves to rally their comrades, and how those whose business it was beat the drums. 'We always obey these messages'.

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In considering the behaviour of the women there is one further fact to be mentioned. They seem to have been convinced, in spite of rhetorical assertions that they were prepared to die, that no harm would come to them. What was the basis of their confidence? Perhaps they remembered that in the fighting which accompanied the occupation of their country, the woman had, as far as possible, been left unharmed.

Marjorie Perham. Native Administration in Nigeria. Oxford University Press, 1937. Reprinted by permission of the publishers in Rich and Wallerstein, Africa: Tradition and Change. Random House, 1972.

Early in January 1930 a Commission, consisting of the Administrator of Lagos Colony and the Crown Counsel, was appointed to apportion the responsibility for the loss of life where firing had taken place. They reported at the end of the month, completely exonerating (clearing) those responsible for the firing. It was generally felt, however, that the serious nature of the disturbances warranted a more representative Commission with wider terms of reference. Such a Commission was appointed in February...

To this second Commission the women are not merely an unruly mob endangering the King's peace and deserving severe treatment. Their intimate and sympathetic investigations take us, as it were, into the heart of the mob, reveal the fears and misunderstandings which moved the women and point to the administrative errors and difficulties from which these arose....

When, therefore, the Government began to count women, with the small stock and poultry which they regarded as peculiarly theirs, they naturally concluded that this meant taxation for themselves, and as naturally rejected all assurances to the contary. We must understand that the women persuaded themselves that they were not only the victims of outrageous oppression but faced with absolute ruin.

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ABA WOMEN'S REBELLION
IS THE RIGHT TO RESIST UNQUALIFIED?

- LESSON PLAN -

There is a myth which still persists among some scholars and lay people that Black Africans unequivocably accepted and perhaps even welcomed colonial rule. Indeed, the opposite is true. Rebellions against colonial rule were common throughout the continent. Resistance has been ever present though not always successful. The Aba Women's Rebellion in Nigeria are one example of the role of women in the political life of colonial Africa. They involved the Ibos who have long been the major ethnic group in eastern Nigeria.

In 1926 the British in colonial Nigeria undertook a population census as the first step in imposing head tax on adult males. However, as was common in such moves, the reason for the census was not given. In 1929 a chief, under instructions from a District Officer took a count of women, children and domestic animals. The accompanying reading (which you may wish to modify) describes the rebellion which followed. Chiefs and Europeans were attacked and property destroyed as illiterate Ibo women rebelled in two densely populated Nigerian provinces.

Why did the women revolt?	- Opposition to taxation which symbolized consolidation of colonial power. - Challenged power to tax. - Resistance to taxation of women - violated basic principles of Ibo society - pay taxes only on property which is not personal.
How do you explain the fact that those revolting were Ibos/ women?	- Ibos have very individualistic values. - Market women dominate some segments of the economy in many West African nations.
What factors facilitated the Aba rebellions?	- Organization in age sets*. - Concentration in markets along major trade routes. - Commonality of interest.

* Children, initiates, warriors, mature men, old men, elders. ..../2

Why did the women attack their own chiefs as well as the British?	- British used the system of "indirect rule" to govern Nigeria. The hierarchy in the Colonial Office was thus Governor, District Officer, Chief, Headman. The British often "elected" the chiefs themselves. With no legitimate claim to power, these chiefs were often viewed as collaborators by the Africans.
How did the Commission's actions affect the situation?	- Calmed a tense situation. - Questioned colonial practices, especially taxation. - Did not generate basic policy changes and considered by some to be a "whitewash".
Is the right to resist unqualified?	- Yes - people have the right to resist unjust practices. The test of "justice" is a difficult one, however. - No - people have the right to resist any situation which they consider oppressive, regardless of the circumstances.

Enrichment:

Resistance movements have often highlighted and stimulated redress of grievance not directly addressed in the aggrieved situation. Illustrate and discuss.	- The Civil Rights movement in the U.S. in the 1960's gave impetus to the Women's Liberation movement. - The resistance to Portuguese colonial rule in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau has encouraged greater mobility to women involved in that movement; also stimulated greater activity in Rhodesia.
There are numerous examples of African resistance to colonial rule. Do research to identify such examples and explore the role of women - if at all - in these instances.	- Abdel Kadar - Algeria Maji Maji - Tanganyika Hut Tax Rebellion - Sierra Leone

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SCHOOL SERVICES DIVISION

HODA SHA'ARAWI: NATIONALIST AND FEMINIST

March 6, 1919 was surprisingly warm for a spring day in Cairo and many people were out on the street early in the day pretending to be merely enjoying the mild weather. The keen observer would have noted, however, that they were not sauntering around looking and listening for signs of the season but were grouped on the sidewalks speaking in hushed tones. Occasionally, people would glance up the streets as if they were expecting dignitaries to appear. By mid-morning, the word went round: "They are coming! Hundreds of them." Almost immediately the streets filled with women, calmly but resolutly marching toward the colonial offices. The procession stretched for as far as the spectators could see. It was an astonishing demonstration - hundreds of veiled women moving together to protest colonial practices.

What prompted this march that has been described as both the first step of the Egyptian feminist movement and the entry of Egyptian women into active politics? To get at the answer, we must look briefly at Egypt's colonial experience with Britain.

In 1882 the British occupied Egypt to ensure their control of the Suez Canal, the main artery to their Indian Empire, and to protect the interests of the Canal's European bondholders. As one would expect, Egyptians resented this but, because of superior British fire power, were unable to do much immediately to change the situation.

Once in charge, the British set about making the country pay for the "privilege" of tutelage. They oversaw the building of the High Dam, worked on the Nile dams, and improved the road system. This emphasis on communications had the aim of making cotton cultivation for English textiles mills a viable economic endeavor. Because they were forbidden to open their own cotton processing factories, many Egyptians with money to invest simply expanded the amount of acreage they had under cotton cultivation often divesting poorer peasants of their plots in the process. The occupation force closed its eyes to this for they needed the support of this wealthy class to make their rule effective. One result of this policy was that Egypt, with its emphasis on cash cropping, was forced, for the first time, to import foodstuffs to meet its domestic needs. .

When World War I broke out, Britain declared a "protectorate" over Egypt and deposed the ruler because he was linked (however tenuously) with the Ottoman Empire which was aligned with the Germans. They declared, however, that Egypt would not be involved in the war.

Almost immediately this promise was broken. Martial law was declared, Egyptian soldiers were called up and the country became the military headquarters for the Middle East.

What is most amazing is that at the end of the war, the Egyptians, rather than rebelling openly, asked only that the British evacuate the country; they were even willing to grant guarantees on the Canal! But the British failed to respond to these moderate demands for they felt Egypt to be even more crucial because of its pivotal position during the conflict. Instead they jailed the leaders who were articulating these ideas. It was then that the call for total independence was sounded.

One of those jailed in 1919 was the husband of Hoda Sha'arawi, a woman who had for some time been involved in the nationalist movement. Rather than look to her male relations for help in obtaining her husband's release, as was customary, she instead invited the women with whom she worked to join her in a demonstration. On March 6, 1919, she led the procession of veiled women through the streets of Cairo to protest the action. As they marched, more and more women joined them. Passers-by, amazed as they were to see hundreds of determined women asserting themselves, were so moved that they attempted to protect them by surrounding the group and forming a moving cordon to keep the British soldiers, bayonets drawn, from stopping them. Eventually the soldiers were able to halt the procession but the women refused to disperse. Instead they stood their ground until late in the day, many fainting in place from the heat.

The lessons of the march were many. Heretofore, the men had been the major activists facing the British; women when involved had generally worked behind the scenes. Hoda Sha'arawi became a rallying point and an acclaimed nationalist leader. Women now began to take a more active role making occupation opposition even more formidable. By 1922 in the face of this united resistance the British began to quit the country. As Egyptian men became more active in their own governance, Hoda Sha'arawi and other women who had joined the movement turned their attention to issues more directly affecting them. On the 4th anniversary of their original demonstration, March 16, 1923, they formed the Egyptian Feminist Union, the first such organization in the Arab world. The Union's aims included equal rights for women in education at all levels; equal political and civil rights; a rise in the minimum marriage age for women to 16; an end to licensed prostitution; and reforms in the country's law code pertaining to divorce, custody of children, alimony, etc. To achieve these ends, they testified before the Parliament beginning with the first in 1924, lobbied men in government and other powerful positions, edited magazines concerned with women's issues in both French and Arabic, attended and organized international women's conferences, and started a social center where women of all ages could meet and study. By the time Hoda Sha'arawi died in 1949, the Association was a viable social and political organization with concrete accomplishments and a large, dedicated, energetic membership.

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HODA SHA'ARAWI : Nationalist and Feminist

To understand contemporary events one needs a knowledge of the historical forces which have molded them. One of the major themes of modern times is that of nationalism. This phenomenon has manifested itself in a variety of ways and times the world over. This reading focuses on nationalism in Egypt through the person of Hoda Sha'arawi who carried her convictions from the nationalist to the feminist struggle. After considering the reading and questions, your students should be able to describe the characteristics of colonialism and nationalism and their links to feminism.

1. a) What are some of the traits of colonialism?
   b) Which of these apply to the Egyptian experience?

2. a) What are some of the traits of nationalism?
   b) Which of these apply to the Egyptian experience?

3. Was the colonial experience an advantage or disadvantage to Egypt?

4. How did colonialism give impetus to the founding of the Egyptian Feminist Union?

5. The Egyptian Feminist Union was a natural outgrowth of the Egyptian nationalist struggle. Do you agree or disagree?

6. Why has the role of Egyptian women in the nationalist movement been overlooked?

7. Compare the background, methods and demands of the Egyptian Feminist Union to those of the women's movement in this country.

Enrichment:

Find out about other African women leaders, for example, Cleopatra and Hatshepsut (Egypt), Mary Muthoni (Kenya), Annie Jiagge (Ghana), Josina Machel (Mozambique).

How do these women reflect the concerns of their people and their times?

View the film Fear Woman. (See bibliography for full citation.) Do the Ghanaian women featured combine nationalist and feminist goals?

Selected Bibliography

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Baheega S. Rasheed, et. al. The Egyptian Feminist Union. Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1973.

The Aba Women's Riots. New York: School Services, A-AI, 1974. 25¢. Classroom module focusing on a Nigerian women's protest against colonial rule early in this century.

Fear Woman. 16 mm. black and white. 30 min. Contemporary McGraw-Hill. Three dynamic Ghanaian women who are movers and doers.

Women Up In Arms. 16 mm. black and white. 29 min. Contemporary McGraw-Hill. Contrasts the lives of three generations of Tunisian women. Much of the narration is done by a 15-year-old girl. Excellent film for insights into modernizing Tunisia and the status of women.